

GRASS

Operation Personified

For Earl McKarns, owner of Shamrock Vale Farms, life is very busy and often hectic. Probably not all that unusual for an owner/operator of a 360-acre farm with 400 head of registered Angus cattle. But add to that a schedule of numerous trips, some as short as a day or two in Columbus, Reno or Dallas, and at other times as long as a month in Europe or Africa. These absences from his Ohio operation would seem to make maintaining a herd of Angus cattle on an intensive grazing system almost impossible without a great deal of help.

“Not at all,” says the robust 64-year-old. “That is the misconception of the whole thing. I travel a lot, but basically one person, either myself, my son Dan, or our one full-time employee, can do all of the herd work with a four-wheeler.”

Located in the northeastern part of the state near Kensington, Shamrock Vale Farms is set up as an efficient operation utilizing a year-round grass and hay program that includes a water system designed to minimize erosion and supply the year-round needs of the cattle. The cattle, separated into four age groups, bred heifers, 2-year-olds, 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds, are maintained on about 250 of the acreage seeded in grasses.

“Our grazing system works really smoothly. We move the cattle morning and evening using poly-wire for the movable fencing. Whoever goes out to do this job also watches for cows in heat. In a couple of hours, we are done moving the herd, doing heat checks and breeding. It’s truly a one-man operation, convenient and efficient.”

Close observation of the whole herd is another attribute of keeping the cattle confined in a small area. McKarns says it definitely makes spotting an animal that may be sick or is having a problem easier, compared to having to go out in a 50- or 100-acre field and run around looking for an animal that is missing and later might be found sick or even dead. When he or others at the operation drive into a pasture, they can usually spot a sick cow or calf at a glance.

Seeing the cattle several times a day also helps McKarns keep meticulous records on all of his cattle. He strongly believes that you cannot improve what you cannot measure. He says there is a great necessity



**Shamrock
Vale Farms
maintains a
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intensive
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system.**

by Janet Mayer

for a good set of records, no doubt a result of his lifelong work with cattle, first in the dairy industry and now with beef cattle. He keeps his records in longhand, and his wife, Nedra, takes care of the books and registration of the cattle. Although he says he has been tempted to computerize his business, he has not done so yet.

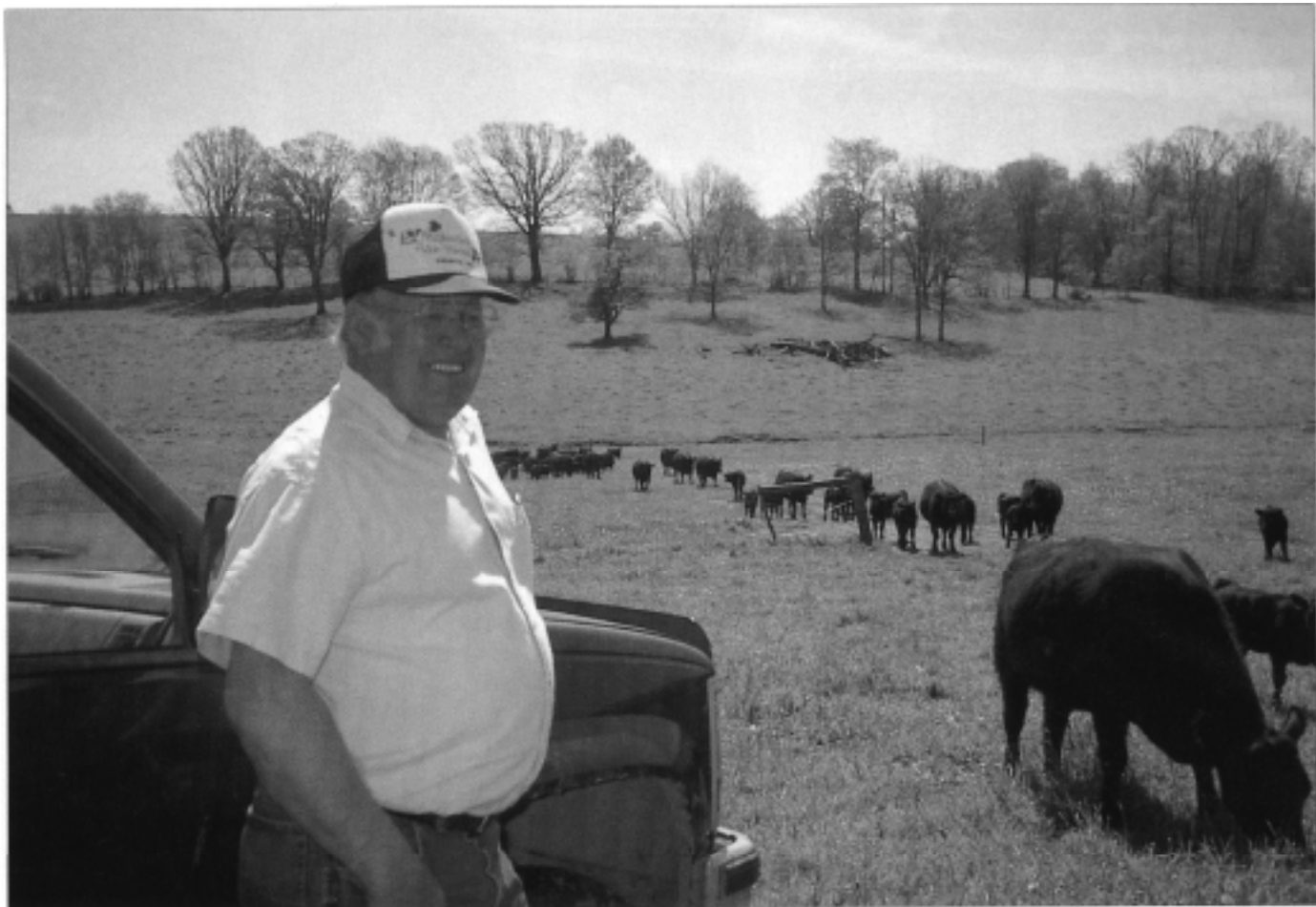
McKarns' cattle experience began on his father's farm, about two miles from the farm where he now lives. He grew up working on his father's dairy and beef operation. After graduation from high school, he joined the Navy during the Korean War, and prior to his discharge in 1955, he bought his first farm including 137 acres and 12 milk cows. He and his wife made the decision to try to make their income solely from the farm, which he says was no doubt the laugh of the community. However, his operation did so well that he began to expand his acreage.

Through the years, he purchased three adjoining farms, increasing the acreage to 550 acres and the dairy herd to 150 head by the 1980s. During the expansion process a small herd of commercial cows was acquired when he bought the farm where McKarns and his wife currently live. This prompted McKarns to include beef cattle in the operation, and during the 1970s he began to build a herd of registered Angus cattle with the purchase of a group of heifers. Using artificial insemination (AI) and keeping heifers to increase and build the herd, he made the decision to sell the high-producing dairy herd and the original 250-acre farm in 1991.

“I guess I have always liked the Angus breed since my father used an Angus bull when he bred for beef,” McKarns recalls. “I knew the breed fulfilled most of the desirable traits I was looking for, with good mothering ability and milk. Also, the Angus Association has always been ahead of other breeds in performance records, which is a very important tool for me. In addition, Angus fit the environment of our location and are marketable.

“I feel both of these aspects are overlooked by people going into the business of breeding cattle. For anyone who asks my advice on starting a breeding

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operation, I tell them to first look for a marketing program and work back through the environment to see what type and breed of cattle will work best.”

The herd at Shamrock Vale Farms is closed, McKarns uses AI to infuse new genetics into his breeding program. When choosing AI sires, he looks for balance of all expected progeny differences (EPDs), moderate-frame and easy fleshing cattle. He looks for a birthweight of +1 to +4, milk +15 to +20 and all of the yearling weight available, but staying in a frame score of 6. In the carcass traits, he looks for good ribeyes, marbling and carcass cutability. He also looks for large scrotal circumference.

“Scrotal circumference has gotten out of control in the Angus breed, because I think they failed to adjust it back to zero for too long,” he says. “Now that they have adjusted it back, all at once these bulls are minus in scrotal, and it becomes like a

sign that we are all in trouble. Our herd is in pretty good shape with scrotal EPDs because we have tried to watch that we use plus bulls.”

Sires of the 1997 calf crop include, Paramount Ambush, GAR Precision, BFRainman, Sleep Easy and Fullback. McKarns says the three bulls he would have to credit with having had a tremendous influence and helped in his long-term breeding program are Scotch Cap, Traveler 5204 and Ambush.

The calving season at Shamrock Vale Farms starts in February, beginning with the heifers as a group and following with the cows. Most of the cows calve outdoors, and the barn is used for problem births and for treating the calves soon after they are born. McKarns says the calves are brought into the barn using a calf carrier on the back of a four-wheeler with the cow following behind. The calves are weighed and their navels are iodined, then the pair is

transferred to another pasture with windbreaks.

The health program for the calves as well as the other cattle is extensive with a rigid vaccination and health program according to a veterinarian’s recommendations. The herd is accredited and certified brucellosis and tuberculosis-free.

McKarns strives to have his cows go into calving season with a body condition score of about 6. He tries to maintain that condition through calving, losing about one to two scores until the grass starts in the spring and breeding time comes again.

Since the 2-year-old heifers are the most difficult group to breed, and in an effort to hold his calving season down to about 60 days, McKarns used heat synchronization this past year for the heifers as well as for any 3-year-old cows that had not yet shown signs of being in heat by that time. He says he would like to have the calving

season down to about 45 days, but feels this is a difficult undertaking with an all grass-program.

McKarns has found the private treaty sale of all 4-year-old cows while they are in their prime of life, has proven to be a good marketing approach. Each fall this group is offered for sale after the weaning of their third calves, and the cows are confirmed to be pregnant. He theorizes that if the cows have been bred right, their daughters should exceed their mother's performance by improving the genetics much faster; therefore, he sells the cow and keeps her progeny.

The top half of each year's crop of bull calves is also sold by private treaty, mostly to commercial breeders. The remainder of the bulls are castrated and either sold as feeders or sent to a feedlot, with McKarns retaining ownership. He tries to gain information on the bulls he has sold by doing follow-up calls to the customers, checking to make sure the bull is performing and the calves he sired are good. On the steers that are fed under retained ownership, he receives valuable carcass information, which helps him breed for improved carcass quality.

"With an all grass program like ours, you can take a lot of pounds of beef off an acre," McKarns says. "I would have to describe myself as an environmentalist and a grass manager with a love and appreciation for the environment. I have seen a lot of examples of what mismanagement of land can do, causing problems like erosion. I like to think of our farm as having a green carpet over all of the acreage, and we try to keep that carpet intact to keep the hard rains from hitting the bare soil."

Orchard grass is the primary grass in the summer pastures at the farm with some bluegrass, a little brome and clover. In the late winter, pastures are frost-seeded with three to four



The Shamrock Vale head is separated into age groups and rotated through the 250 acres in a year-round grass system.

pounds of clover to the acre, broadcasting the seed from the four-wheeler. In areas of wear and tear, the pastures are reseeded on a regular basis. Moving through the series of paddocks nine to 10 times a year, the cattle fertilize the areas with their manure and urine as they harvest the grass. In addition to this natural source, fertilizer is used sparingly and chemical sprays are never used.

McKarns uses fescue for winter feed, making the grass into hay while it's in the green stage before it goes to seed in late July or early August. He makes small round bales of hay, leaving the bales where they drop. Using a spreader, the fields between the bales are fertilized with about 50 units of nitrogen and the grass is not cut again, but left to grow for winter pasture.

During the winter months, the cattle are pastured in the hay fields, rotating them once a day. Even with the snow, McKarns says the cows see the humps and root out the bales. Since the bales are small and not much touches the ground, there is not a lot of waste like there is in larger bales. During the process of eating the hay, the cattle uncover the grass, which McKarns says they graze by bulldozing through the snow. If there is a lot of ice or a

crust on the snow, hay is hauled in to supplement the feed.

"You have to use common sense when it comes to winter grazing," McKarns cautions. "I wouldn't go so far as to say there will come a time when we won't make any hay, but I would say there will come a time when we will do most of our feeding by grazing right through the winter, and we will have hay on hand only for insurance purposes."

Although McKarns has attained many goals he has set for his operation, he feels he needs to keep setting new ones. "In the cattle business, goals are really a moving target, primarily because consumers are always changing their minds about the product they want. Sometimes I think we tend to bury our heads in the sand as to what the consumer really wants, but without the consumer, we are nowhere."

McKarns tries to keep abreast of the consumers' needs as well as the issues confronting the beef industry as a whole. He is an active member of the Ohio Beef Council, president of the Ohio Forage and Grassland Council, a director for the Carroll County Soil and Water Conservation, past president of the Ohio Cattlemen's Association, a board member of

the U.S. Meat Export Federation for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and a member of Volunteer Overseas Cooperative Assistance (VOCA).

VOCA is an organization that aids agriculture and farmers in underdeveloped countries. McKarns has volunteered twice to travel to Slovakia for a month. During these stays, McKarns says he shared his knowledge about dairy farming with several farmers who needed help in learning how to make their operations profitable. He also spent a month in Zimbabwe, Africa, working with beef producers.

"I enjoy passing my knowledge on to people who need help," McKarns says. "Although these activities make me spend quite a bit of time away from the farm, I have always found it interesting. I started out with just my love for the cattle and the land and a lot of ambition. I didn't go to college and have had to educate myself. Along the way I have learned a tremendous amount and, in fact, am still learning. I have led a full life, and I feel it's my duty to pass that on to someone else. It's like the Bible says — don't light a candle and put it under a bushel basket, pass it on to someone else."

